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Communicative curriculum perceived by Iranian language teachers

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Abstract

This paper examines Iranian English teachers' perception of communicative curriculum in one of Open Institutes. For this purpose, a tailor-made questionnaire was designed and administered to 6 English language teachers. These teachers were also interviewed in order to identify their attitudes towards communicative curriculum and its implementation in Iranian context. Descriptive analysis of data revealed that the most significant footprint of communicative curriculum in Iranian Open Institutes is the emphasis on pair work by teachers; however, dialogues, reading, grammar, and vocabularies are not integrated in an interactive way. According to their demographic information, learners' Cultural background and teachers' academic major were identified as main reasons for gap between communicative curriculum and its implementation in Iranian context.

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1. Introductions

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is a language teaching approach which has widely been used all over the world in recent decades. When majority of Iranian language teachers and language Institutes are asked about their curriculum in their classes, they claim that they use communicative curriculum. However, attention to details shows that CLT is defined variously among them and they perceive it as a method which includes conversations without teaching grammar. This definition of CLT is considered as a misconception by some scholars as Jack C. Richards, 2006.

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In recent decades, a number of studies have been done on misunderstanding about CLT (Wen Wu, 2008; Thompson, 1996). However, present study investigates how Iranian language teachers perceive communicative curriculum. In light of this research question, their rationale behind the techniques, activities and methodology they use in the class is discussed. In all, CLT is mainly concerned with “communicative competence” (Jack C. Richards, 2006; Hymes, 1972; Savignon, 1972). In this area of study, to reach the purpose of new coming approach called CLT to develop in 1970s; communicative curriculum may play the role of an approval seal setting on the way CLT had ahead.

2. CLT and Communicative Curriculum

By Chomskyan approach which demonstrates language characteristics of creativity and upcoming demand of concentrating on communication in language learning rather than language form, many scholars advocated achieving communicative ability as main concern of new approach such as Christopher Candlin, Henry, and Widdoson. The art of state approach has been called communicative language teaching (CLT) and adopts negotiation and humanity perspective towards language teaching methodology and language learners. Due to the purpose of CLT as defined by different scholars: “communicative competence” (Jack C. Richards, 2006), they have looked for an appropriate curriculum that could meet this end. Therefore, they have reformed the definition of teacher’s role, learner’s role, language teaching and learning, classroom context, and techniques need to be applied in order to exploit learning process.

Development of different types of syllabuses and curriculums was categorized by Yalden (1983) into eight groups. The common principle in all these communicative curriculums is interactive approach that defines skills like integrated process of learning, provides realistic environment in language classrooms and emphasizes on learners’ needs and interests (Michael P. Breen and Christopher N. Candlin, 1980; Munby, 1976). Although the main focus is on target language to expose learners to target language as much as possible (Finocchiaro and Brumfit⁸, 1983; Jack C. Richards, 2006), teachers are allowed to use first language in order to improve communication or to keep up learners’ motivation. However, there are still many misconceptions about communicative curriculum principles particularly proposing first language use as a taboo in the English classes (Wen Wu, 2008; Geoff Thompson, 1996; Prabhu, 1987). Dialogues don’t need to be memorized by learners, but they are supposed to be followed as a model presented in textbook to incorporate their background communicative ability and linguistic knowledge to generalize rules (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983). Role play, group work, stimulations, task based on communicative activities are also integral part of a communicative curriculum (Jack C. Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Stemler, 2001; Erdem, 2010).

3. Research methodology

To have an in depth look of perspective towards English teachers’ perception about communicative curriculum in Iranian context and to discuss its relationship with Iranian language learners’ culture, descriptive research method was developed and a mixed method approach was selected to investigate the research question behind the paper both qualitatively and quantitatively. The questionnaire was discussed quantitatively in order to get an insight into details of Iranian language teachers’ perception about overall approach, techniques, cultural perspectives they have in their classroom contexts. Besides, a semi-structured interview incorporated to explain the reasons deeply.

3.1. Participants

Participants of this study were chosen as a convenience sample with the key criterion for selection being that they worked in an Open Institute which claimed for having communicative curriculum. They had 2-14-year-experience in English language teaching and they were 28 ± 4 years old. Table 1 shows the demographic information of total number of 6 participants in present study.

Table1:Demographic information of the participants:

		Frequency
Gender:	Male:	2
	Female:	4
Experiencing in teaching English:		2- 14
Age:		28±4
Degree:		6
Major:	TEFL/TESL	1
	Not related to teaching	5

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Questionnaire

A paper and pencil questionnaire including two sections (18 items based on Likert Scale and 4 demographic open-questions) was conducted. The validity of questionnaire was verified by three experts and Chronbach's alpha reliability was calculated as 0.96 .The first set of questions numbered 1-4 investigated participants' demographic information. The second part of questions comprised a set of items related to communicative and non-communicative assumption of teachers based on a five point Likert Scale according to the level of agreement. For the Likert Scale, the options included strongly agree, agree, no idea, disagree, and strongly disagree.

3.2.2. Semi-Structured interview

To elicit the teachers' perception behind the techniques they use in the classrooms and the reason behind agreeing or disagreeing with items in the questionnaire, participants were also interviewed. The semi- structured interview contained 9 questions. In interview, teachers' perception was investigated to realize whether this approach is compatible with Iranian context and culture. Interview was designed in a way to be competent to find out the reasons for the gap which exists between communicative curriculum intention and its implementation in Iranian context.

3.2.3. Data Analysis

The Likert questionnaire was analyzed based on values assigned to each choice as: Strongly Agree=5, Agree=4, No Idea=3, Disagree=2, and Strongly Disagree=1. These data was descriptively analyzed by software SPSS. 16. Frequency, mean, and standard deviation of each question in the survey were calculated. Semi-structured interview was also discussed qualitatively by categorizing participants' statements. The interview was recorded in a tape. Statements were carefully transcribed and read to identify the rationale behind the answers that each participant wrote in questionnaire. An open technique for analyzing them was used.

4. Findings

Questions in semi-structured interview were a follow up set of items that investigated participants' rationale behind the answer they had in questionnaire. Questionnaire was categorized based on 4 principles of communicative curriculum:

1. Using communicative techniques and activities
2. Using first language as if it is needed to improve communicative competence
3. Exploiting both fluency and accuracy
4. Learner-centred classroom

Analyzing data shows that 50% of teachers (three out of 6 participants) believed that memorizing dialogue is an effective way to improve language learners' structure, and 66.7% of them agreed to check all vocabularies in reading before grasping the main idea of texts. Although 66.7% maintained that focusing on grammar and teaching grammar explicitly is an important technique in English classes. 100% argued role play and group work are best

ways to integrate learners' communicative ability to real like context as much as possible. In all, 66.7% of total number of participants had a negative view towards communicative approach and communicative language teaching. To look more closely into the reasons, here we present their statements in semi-structured interview:

Teacher 1:

Learning vocabulary is important because students can understand text better and can communicate.

Teacher 2:

I think pre-teaching vocabularies is more important than teaching them in reading. In my opinion, if you pre-teach them; students will be so comfortable in reading, but it doesn't work all the time, since they are sometimes hard and intangible vocabularies which must be understood in context.

Their opinion about grammar definition in learning second language is:

Teacher 2:

Grammar is a set of rules which learners must obey them if they want to learn how to speak and I think teacher has the most important role to make grammar and teaching enjoyable.

Teacher 5:

I severely believe in teaching grammar.

Underlined phrases in interviewers' statements show that they assume vocabulary and grammar as main concern rather than comprehension of text and going through context to structure in teaching grammar as it is intended in communicative curriculum. However, two other teachers perceive them as:

Teacher 4:

Grammar is the structure of the language. It isn't the main aspect, but it is important.

Teacher 6:

It must be taught indirectly and without too much written exercise s. Just as far as learners get how to use it in the sentence is enough.

The belief in integrated skills and holistic view towards language learning is clearly stated in their ideas. Teaching grammar indirectly is indicated in the statement of only one teacher whose major in university was TEFL and she is the only participant in this study that her academic education was related to the profession she is working in.

The second communicative principal was teachers' ideas about using first language and translation whenever needed, while the target language is the main means of communication in the classes. 88.3% of teachers disagree with this assumption. They believe:

Teacher 6:

In my view, translation makes them lazy, when you are an easy going teacher and let them speak and ask or translate they can be distracted, puzzled by interfering of first language.

Teacher 3:

I think it can affect language learning negatively. It slows rate of learning new topics.

Avoiding first language and translation as a principle of CLT is a misconception (Wen Wu, 2008; Geoff Thompson 1996; Eyadat, & Eyadat, 2010) in all over the world that also has been observed in this study. Accuracy centred conversations in the classes is perceived by 50% percent of total participants as integral part of teachers' role need to be taken care of it. They believed even if communication is taking place, learners' mistakes must be corrected. More interestingly, they stated that language learners themselves prefer to be corrected by teachers that seem as a cultural factor.

5. Conclusion

Despite the fact that communicative curriculum is a proven useful method and the purpose of language learning teaching as "communicative curriculum" is strongly accepted, but diversity of contexts and culture challenges its compatibility with all language learning/ teaching contexts and all learners with different cultures. This study shows Iranian language teachers have a middle ground approach between traditional approach and CLT. Therefore, communicative curriculum used in English classes is not entirely implemented according to predefined principles. Teachers emphasize on target language use in the classes and the only accepted communicative activities are role-plays and group work. Grammar, vocabularies are considered as separate components of language. The definition of language is not holistic. Through interviewing participants, two reasons were identified for the gap between intended communicative curriculum and its implementation in real context. One of them is Iranian learners' culture. Teachers believe that they are dependent on teachers, and they don't tend to acquire autonomy in language learning. They expect their teachers to concentrate on their accuracy more than fluency. Another reason worth considering

and acted as an important factor is participants' academic major in university. Majority of them graduated in majors different from TEFL/TESL. One of the participants who had graduated in TEFL was more aware of principals in communicative curriculum than the other participants.

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